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4911 Aurora Drive
Kensington, Maryland 20895
May 30, 1988

Committee
Study on Treatment of Alcohol Problems
National Academy of Sciences
Institute of Medicine
2101 Constitution Avenue N.W.
Washington, D.C.

Dear Committee Members:

It is a pleasure for Oxford House to be part of a National Academy of Sciences study on treatment for alcoholism, in a section dealing with the social model of recovery. As we understand the social model from a seminar in which we participated at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in November 1986, Oxford House certainly falls within that category.

John O'Neill, a former journalist and one of the founders of Oxford House, Inc., is currently principle investigator of a study for the U.S. Department of Labor. J. Paul Molloy, is a lawyer who was for many years on the staff of the U.S. Congress and who is now in private practice. Both have been associated with Oxford House since its beginning in 1975.

The report for the Department of Labor deals with the feasibility of using the 14 Oxford Houses as a model for transitional housing for homeless veterans with alcohol and drug problems.

Oxford House began in 1975 when, because of a tight budget, Montgomery County, Maryland withdrew funding from a halfway house for alcoholics. The residents had attained a few months sobriety and were fearful of losing it if they had to move into solitary, substandard housing, which was all most could afford. They found they could assume the lease on the house and decided to go it on their own. Lacking any outside support, they became self-supporting. Lacking a manager, they decided the house would be democratically run. All halfway house rules (curfews, mandatory attendance at AA, lights out, etc.) were abolished but one: anyone who drank or used drugs would be evicted immediately. To this they added the rule that everyone would have to pay his share of expenses. There would be no maximum stay. House members would decide when they felt comfortable enough in their sobriety to move. So long as a resident stayed sober and didn't unduly disrupt others, Oxford House would be his home.

A president and treasurer were elected to help run the business

of the house. Decisions were made at a weekly meeting by majority vote, except an 80 percent vote was needed to accept new members. There would be no AA or NA meetings in the house, but new members would be encouraged to attend. They wrote an Oxford House Manual describing in detail how Oxford House works.

Once paying their own way and managing their own affairs, the changes in attitude were palpable. Feelings of dependence and defeat were replaced with independence and pride. After six months the house was full and there was a $1,200 surplus. House members, feeling guilty that many others wanted to move in and there was no room, decided to give the money away to start a second house. Only great pride in what they had created could have motivated 13 men of very limited means to give away nearly $100 each.

A second house was started, and then there were two to help start a third, and so on. Oxford House owns no property. All houses are leased. The organization grew from one to 14 houses--13 in the Washington, D.C. area and one in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania--without any outside financial support, without any publicity, and without a staff. Pride in living and staying sober in Oxford Houses motivate residents to start new houses.

There is no formal treatment in Oxford House, but it is a healing environment. Hundreds of residents say they wouldn't have stayed sober without the positive influence of a peer group of people staying sober, working and improving their lives. Peer pressure, the say, is a very powerful influence.

There are 11 Oxford Houses for men and three for women, with an average of 10 residents each. The houses are about 40 percent black and 60 percent white. They are all ages from late teens to those in their 70s. It's impossible to categorize the hundreds of people who have live in Oxford Houses. They have included physicians, carpenters, lawyers, laborers, foreign service officers, restaurant workers, butchers, writers and janitors. A one-page outline of Oxford House is enclosed.

For years Oxford House has had a good reputation as a place to learn to live soberly. As a consequence, thousands have had to be rejected because there was no room. In 1987, Oxford House decided to try to raise some money to lend to groups to start new houses and to start a service board to help expansion and communication.

We appreciate the opportunity to tell you about Oxford House.

Yours sincerely,

John V. O'Neill

J. Paul Molloy